In Dissensus, We Trust. Prototyping Social Relationships in Participatory Theatre

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“If the culture of prototyping indeed prototypes hope, shouldn’t we all hope for prototyping cultures more generally?”
(Corsín Jiménez 2014:382)

Abstract: This paper discusses the potential of participatory theatre to rethink structures of society. More specifically, I examine how we can perceive this art practice as prototyping social relationships. The concept of prototyping (Corsín Jiménez 2014) in this paper is considered as a frame of possibility, that generates both modes of knowledge production and styles of exchange and interaction. While this definition of prototyping keeps the function of the surrogate that can be at once ‘more than many and less than one’, it announces as well a shift from creating artefacts to social relationships. I delve into this inquiry of participatory theatre prototyping society through an analysis of the work of the Belgian performing artist Katrien Oosterlinck who has developed a practice that facilitates meaningful contexts for being together. These meaningful contexts translate to interactive theatre settings in which the visitors engage with their own bodies, with others and with elements from their environment. Retaining to the notions of participation, bridging attitude (Otte 2014) and dissensus (Rancière 2010) as key aspects of the proposed view on politics, this paper analyzes the work Imagine Moving Rocks of Katrien Oosterlinck as a system of prototyping. Dissensus, coined by Rancière, refers to the conflict between sensory regimes and/or bodies, allowing for reconfigurations of a structure of sensory experience. While the strength of the proposed politics resides in its diversity, with difference taking root in its structure, trust needs to introduced as crucial element as well, as it provides a sense of common ground. This notion will not, however, be considered as trust in each other, but as trust in shared intention, providing the framework of spaces of trust rather than safe spaces. The study of the frame proposed in Imagine Moving Rocks uncovers the social principles engendering the practice of Katrien Oosterlinck. Through the idea of a bridging attitude this sociality holds the promise to become analogous to sociality in society, instilling a specific idea of politics. This disclosure of the social relationships becoming analogous to each other provides an analysis of prototyping, allowing the theatre practice of Oosterlinck to become a metaphor for a more responsible, available and co-creative society.

Keywords: Prototyping, participatory theatre, participation, bridging attitude, dissensus
1. Introduction

Imagine: rocks moving on a white canvas. Small artefacts made of white stones and bright colored tape drifting on a tiny stage of 20 by 20 centimeters. A circle of people you know (more or less) huddled around it. You move your rock in a choreography with eleven other people. Hands respectfully waiting, impelling, hovering, stirring. A miniature negotiation that lasts until every rock is content with its position both on the canvas and in relation to the other rocks.

This setting is a game that is part of the participatory performance Imagine Moving Rocks [IMR] by Belgian artist Katrien Oosterlinck; a game grid for eight to twelve people. The performance is made for a black box as it creates an aesthetic frame for collective play (performed by the participants) through light, sound and floor setting. It follows an explicit form of interaction wherein the participants are invited to bodily engage with each other; both through the miniature setting of the stone game and a human scaled playground in which the participants take in the position their rock holds on the tiny stage, in relation to the others. The interactive engagement between the participants transcends a one-to-one experience with a performer as it is lived collectively, amplifying sociality from a singular encounter to an event that is sensitive to group dynamics. Furthermore, while being entirely voluntary, the actions performed by the participants are instigated by the voice of Oosterlinck, who facilitates the play from the first moment the participants enter the black box until they eventually depart back into the world.

She invites and proposes; opens up possibilities by naming phases and next steps. She lays the groundwork for exploring your personal space, solidified by taping it down on a transparent pliable square. She provides the frame to engage with the other participants through their spaces (which might be yellow, pink or black; a closed off circle, a porous square or an unidentifiable, three dimensional shape); by touching each other’s bodies in various positions or by acknowledging the space in between this amalgam of bodies, charged with potential. The play marks a cartography of social bonds, mediating social experience through the somatic. It prototypes relationships - as they are - as they can be perceived - as they may morph by encountering others.
2. Participation

“Imagine Moving Rocks is a play, an environment in which you can explore your interpersonal relations. It’s a zone where you communicate with each other through body language and by making images. I will guide you step by step through this experiment. I present the rules, you play the game. I present options and you make choices. You make the journey by yourselves. Today, you are visiting this performance space, but not to watch me; to watch yourself and your company: each other.” - Introduction to IMR, disclosed to the participants by Katrien Oosterlinck.

2.1. Participatory Theatre

Before we plunge deeper into this exposition, it might be convenient to clarify some vocabulary. While there is, for example, a vast difference between the notion of theatre and performance (performance stemming from the visual arts instead of the performing arts) I will use these notions as substitutes for each other. Participatory theatre and participatory performance therefore will be used interchangeably to talk about the proposed case study IMR.

In theatre studies, participatory theatre denominates a field that is intensely dynamic when it comes to form (Frieze 2016:3). As a matter of fact, the notion participatory theatre has been rendered inclusive due to people claiming the notion for a variety of theatre forms. The downfall to this inclusiveness is the conceptual confusion it instigates, as there is no longer a clear reference which people agree upon. Therefore, I do not use this notion to label a genre of theatre but rather as a way to explore the concept of participation. I will analyze this notion by looking into the politics of the specific participatory form elaborated in IMR. Furthermore, this case study serves as a framework through which I aim to ‘read’ an artistic practice with political potential.

2.2. Partaking

I do want to emphasize the specific sense how I adopt the notion of participation as, analogous to participatory theatre, there is a multitude of interpretations of this concept. In the first sense, I employ the notion of participation as people who take part in a theatre performance. This partaking in IMR can be thought of as interacting in a performance through active bodily engagement. The participation is specifically focused on the timeframe of the performance itself and should not be understood as ‘non-professionals’ taking part in the creative process. In that sense, IMR should not be understood as socio-artistic, socially engaged or applied theatre in which the underrepresented voice of minorities is integrated into the work (Bishop 2012).

The introductory text to IMR quoted above, is shared at the very beginning of the performance in a reception room. In this room participants meet each other, take off their shoes, put on fresh socks and meet the crew. It is a compression and decompression room that functions as an in-between zone between the outside world and the play world of IMR. It is the first phase in introducing a space of trust, a notion that I suggest instead of a safe space, and which we will return to later on. After entering the playground, the participants start off with a stone game, cleverly using language as a zone of transition.
“These are the stones of Imagine Moving Rocks. Observe them closely. You can also take them and try to place them on different sides. Eventually, you chose one stone. Place the stone on your hand and watch it from all sides. It’s as if you meet your stone. Can you recognize a character or a quality in it? What is specific about your stone? Try to capture this in one word. When you’ve found a word, show your stone to the others and say it.” - Instructions for the first phase of the stone game.

2.3. Performativity

This game of looking and showing displays participants not merely partaking, but actually instating the personal through the social. Therefore, besides participation including interaction, we consider the ability to perform within a frame another major element of this notion. When participating, one always does this both in relation to a frame and to the other people who participate within the frame. The concept of performativity in this research thus expands the systems of the gaze (Mulvey 1975; Butler 1990) to the relationality within social relations and group dynamics. It reclaims the notion of beholding not solely as looking, but also as holding or tending to. Hence we can understand the capacity to participate as the capacity to relate to something; to simultaneously behold and hold one’s bearing. I choose the word bearing in replacement of position as position reflects a static relationality whereas bearing incorporates a dynamic relationality.

The idea that a participant both beholds and holds bearing, arises early on in IMR: after naming the state of the rocks, the stones are spread out on the small canvas as if it were a Mikado game; randomly finding its place. The participants watch the situation, find their stone, its place in relation to the other stones and in relation to the game board. Participants are invited to share once more one word that describes the feeling of their stone in that specific spot, while pointing at their stone. Here already the participants’ attention is brought to what it means to hold a position in relation to others and in relation to a space. In the next phase, the stones can explore different positions on the game board. One stone starts by taking in a new position, instigating the other stones to react by taking a new position as well. In two phases a sequence of movement follows until every stone has found a position that feels right.
3. Bridging attitude

Participation in IMR is not the aim or the product, but a process which everyone commits to. Through engaging with the frame, the participants are introduced to each other and are provided with the opportunity to explore connections. The idea of connection is commonly posited as the establishment of a connection through similarity. In this paper we will however propose the idea of connection through difference.

3.1. Axes of Connection

In her doctoral thesis Dutch cultural sociologist Hanka Otte introduces the notion of bridging attitude as one approach to establish social cohesion. This approach is contrasted with a binding attitude in which engagement stems from recognition; a form that appears among people who identify with the same community. While in binding cohesive behavior, similarities are stimulated, bridging cohesive behavior encapsulates a capacity to be curious towards difference, inspiring to traverse dissimilarity (Gittell and Vidal 1998). It is a basic curiosity, a willingness to get to know the other and to embrace other opinions, perspectives and experiences.

Besides discerning binding and bridging connections, Otte differentiates between an ideological connection and a relational connection. A relational connection is established between people that physically encounter each other, while an ideological connection is centered around shared values or ideas and does not necessarily have to occur among people physically sharing space. Each of these connections can be more determinative for a relationship (Otte 2016:88). For example, performers who meet each other during a creative process have a relational connection as they collectively work on creating a performance. However, the very fact that they come together around a shared intention and collectively practice, may enhance their ideological connection.
Otte combines these two axes of binding-bridging and ideological-relational into a quadrant which represents different forms of social cohesion. For example, cohesive behavior in the relational dimension can lead to homogeneous (binding) or heterogeneous (bridging) networks. Within the ideological dimension this can lead to closed and segregative attitude (binding) or an open one (bridging). The question of durability can also be raised, as one cannot take for granted that the bridging attitude, felt during an event, will surely continue afterwards, when people go home, or in a next encounter. It is however exactly the attitude on the ideological dimension that determines the durability of cohesion and what forms of participation are possible (Otte 2016:91).

3.2. Hold Bearing

“What stays with me is the atmosphere and the feeling it evokes. How you engage with materials such as stones and tape and out of these elements are challenged to search for connections; to advance in connection physically with people you do not know - something you would never do outside of that space. And if I would see those people again now, I would carry the feeling that was created back then with me into this re-encounter.”

- Reaction of a participant a year after participating in IMR (2019).

IMR is said to both lay bare the relations people have in daily life and help notice how versatile and mutable those relations may be. The aforementioned testimony could be regarded as such a mutable relation, brought forth through binding behavior - even though the participants did not know each other. The relational dimension IMR proposes can quite easily establish binding behavior, albeit not knowing each other. Recognizing that the audience of IMR certainly does not always have a different demographic background, bridging attitudes in the ideological dimension could still be explored. IMR does not, after all, only invite people to engage with each other; participants are also challenged to engage with the invitations of Oosterlinck; with the frame that is proposed. It is a constant negotiation in holding bearing. While a binding attitude is quite swiftly established through the relationalities among the participants, participants are also invited to explore their bridging attitude through holding bearing to the framework.
Though it is not the intention of Katrien Oosterlinck’s work to instruct people how to interact with each other, it does embody the potential to impact how people approach, perceive and learn from their environment. This approaching the environment principally emanates from the proposed frames in IMR; the stone games, the exploration of one’s personal space and that of the others, and the creative play in dynamically holding bearing to each other on the playfield. The bridging attitudes, explored through one’s approach to the environment, are instigated by the element of play that is, in turn, sparked by the frame of IMR.

Hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer describes play as a continual repetition of movement without clear goal (1977:48). He designates this with his renowned example of the play of waves or light, in which movement is the play itself. The participatory performance discussed in this paper provides a frame for exactly this sort of free play which focuses on the process rather than the outcome. By provoking free play, people are challenged to understand and generate new rules with which they have to create or perceive something new. This modality of free play inscribes theatre’s potential to a bridging attitude as they both stem from a curiosity towards difference (Otte 2016:91). This claim builds on the assessment of Dutch researcher Hans Van Maanen that people who are able to cope with this challenging play or the playful challenges will be more open to other cultures. Playing with new rules and value systems in this specific setting might, after all, inspire and develop one’s adequacy to understand cultures that stem from other rules and values than one’s familiar with - or at least try to (Van Maanen 2009:191; Otte 2016:94).

4. Prototyping

Social cohesion operates on a micro, meso or macro level. An example of the micro level is a personal network of people, while the meso level is the organized environment wherein people perform. Lastly, the macro level covers the more abstract societal plane in which people relate to other people or groups without personally knowing or meeting them (Otte 2016:87). As a theatre scholar, I focus on the most practically feasible (micro) level of the participatory performance in which individuals, rather than groups, interact with each other. As Otte mentions, the cohesion between groups and people within society manifests itself in people’s actions and behavior, making an analysis on micro level meaningful (Coleman 1990:6-10). This stance that an analysis of the micro level can provide insight into how people interact, resonates with the idea of prototyping.
4.1. Prototyping Sociality

“We live in a society wherein scarcely anything is concerned with making connections. Somehow this simple setting however manages to evoke a societal dimension. It is astonishing what you can achieve with almost nothing, with such a small elements as stones, tape, invitations. In everyday life it rarely happens (or at least it is quite difficult once you have turned thirty) that you succeed in establishing akin connections.” - Reaction of a participant a year after participating in IMR (2019).

In order to look into the notion of the bridging attitude, I do not take a stance that one theatre performance is transformative and fundamentally alters individuals. Rather I claim that IMR, as a participatory frameworks, holds the potential to prototype social relationships, through a bridging attitude, but moreover a bridging attitude through the frame. The concept of prototyping social relations, coined by Spanish anthropologist Alberto Corsín Jiménez (2014), keeps the function of the surrogate, but introduces a shift from creating artefacts to sociality. He considers the prototype as a frame of possibility that generates both modes of knowledge production, and styles of exchange and interaction.

Corsín Jiménez formulates his interest in prototyping as “something that happens to social relationships when one approaches the craft and agency of objects in particular ways” (2014:383). This statement is applicable to the practice of Katrien Oosterlinck, in which the participants actively engage with others, with elements in space (such as the transparent squares or stones), but also with the offered frame. Prototyping then becomes a figure of possibility and suspension that functions in a conditional tense. It suggests a suspension of ordinary relationships in which there is often a formation of collectivity outside ordinary social structures while also symbolically recreating society. The individual is confronted with an ever present ecology, realizing it is part of something bigger even though one is not always aware of it (Tresch 2005:74-75). As such, the prototype is an analogical figure in which the cultural form is “capable of prefiguring its inherent transformative and inventive dynamic” (Corsín Jiménez 2014:389). Beyond this inherent dynamic that is generated through the frame, IMR does not make a claim to durably transform relationships. Neither does it have the patent on converting relationships, as Corsín Jiménez mention that “[r]elations are always turning themselves ‘into’ other relations, moving in and out of different social forms” (2014:389).

4.2 Prototyping Compossibility

As both a game and a trap are prototypes as well, we will consider entering the game structures in IMR as allowing yourself to be trapped. When trapped “[o]ur intentions come to a halt and our relationship with the artefact comes into full view” (Corsín Jiménez 2014:391) as the trap interrupts consensual expectations. It also puts participants “in a mode which gives the issue around which they are all gathered the power to activate thinking, a thinking that belongs to no one, in which no one is right” (Stengers 2005:1001). This time frame has the capacity for abduction (different from in- or deduction) that describes how an entity extracts meaning from the surroundings or social relationships in which it is located.

The futurity of the prototype holds an impetus that often leads to diverging scenarios which
are not experienced as necessarily destructive, but rather as an expression of the conditions of possibility of the prototype itself. These branches go in unsuspected directions as a creative act that displays the internal capacities of people at the same time as the external power of relationships (Corsín Jiménez 2014:393). Corsín Jiménez sees prototyping as a distinct form of analysis that places analysis itself ‘in beta’. With this, he means that it produces scenarios of compossibility rather than comparison (which presumes scale) or compatibility (that requires partiality) (2014:385). This element of compossibility opens up a myriad of possibilities, which is embraced in the playground of IMR.

The frame of IMR stimulates interactions in which scenarios of compossibility are incorporated as a legitimate realization. There is a great freedom offered: to stay within your own space, to step outside of it, to search for connections; there is no obligation to do anything. For example, at the beginning, during the stone game, the option is given for the stones to take a break, at any moment, by resting outside the game board on the table or in the participant’s hand. This option of taking a break granted to the stones is additionally given to the participants when they advance to the full body play on the big canvas. By giving this option to disengage with the suggested frames, participants are often strengthened in their tentative play and less insecure about doing anything wrong; which should be at the core of any participatory practice. This also gives an answer to the ethical issues which often arise concerning participatory theatre as critics ask how much participants are coerced or manipulated: as mentioned, participation in IMR is not the product, but a process which everyone commits to. It explores connections with others whilst also strengthening the autonomy of each individual, valuing the diverse opinions, perspectives and experiences.

4.3 Prototyping Dissensus

The dismantling of the artwork into multiple potentialities can be linked to the aesthetics of politics of French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2010) who redefines the political potential of art as the multiplicity of an artwork. Opposed to the political intention an artist might want to convey, he understands the political as a redistribution of the sensible world, rather than an identifiable
(and activist) political position. In this sense, Rancière shifts, as many other philosophers do, the emphasis from party politics to metapolitics. He furthers on the tension and confusion between the autonomy and heteronomy of the artwork. The autonomy being the desire for art to be at one remove from means-ends relationships, while the heteronomy works with the blurring of art and life as art attributes its existence to the outside source of human interaction. He considers art to be a sphere both at one remove from politics and yet always already political because it contains the promise of a better world.

This better world is achieved through the concept of dissensus as politics, which does not designate a conflict as such, but rather a conflict between sense and sense. It is “a conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it, or between several sensory regimes and/or ‘bodies’” (Rancière 2010:139). Dissensus can then reside at the core of politics as the latter consists in “an activity that redraws the frame within which common objects are redetermined” (Rancière 2010:139). As such, politics as dissensus breaks with the sensory self-evidence of the ‘natural’ order that destines specific individuals and groups to occupy positions of rule or being ruled, that is to specific ways of being, seeing and saying. Politics is therefore suggested to invent “new ways of making sense of the sensible, new configurations between the visible and the invisible, and between the audible and the inaudible, new distributions of space and time – in short, new bodily capacities” (Rancière 2010:139). As such, the idea of dissensus accepts the autonomy of one’s perception when engaging with another’s perception, not aiming to reach consensus, nor conflict, but rather a dissensual common sense.

The idea of dissensual common sense proposed by Rancière as a potential politics, can, concretely, be established through individuals taking on a bridging attitude. This bridging attitude is the reason why I suggested at the beginning that we talk about a space of trust, rather than a safe space. While in a safe space you look to make connection in which you come to a consensus or an agreement, a space of trust can live with dissensus. When one has confidence in its bridging attitude, dissensus is not perceived as a threat, but rather as an enrichment. The frames of IMR can therefore be conceived as a mechanism for holding in suspension the political, which we can understand as an aesthetic effect.

The prototypical qualities of IMR then function on two levels, namely the relationality one holds to the frame as well as to others, through which you can be confronted with experiences of dissensus. To finish off, as the prototypical invests in open-endedness, oriented to employ political effect, the prototype aims for “events that summon their own openness to future tinkering” (Corsín Jiménez 2014:382). Prototyping, becoming a surrogate for processes of democratization or other new cultural experiences, has thus provided us with a language for a new political design directed towards a re-arrangement of equipment (ware) in space and time.

5. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to demonstrate how we can draw inspiration from Katrien Oosterlinck’s participatory practice through the concept of prototyping. Connected to what Corsín Jiménez calls prototyping its own recursion, her practice creates the possibility for elements that emerge in a performance to reappear again in other contexts. While Katrien Oosterlinck often describes the aim of her practice as ‘simply’ showing the bonds that are present, I have argued that it also
sparks a bridging attitude that facilitates a sense of connection through difference.

This is established through holding bearing to both other participants who are committed to the participatory frame and the frame itself. When we consider the relationality with others, we can think of Imagine Moving Rocks as a prototype that is infused with the world views of the participants in which participants are confronted with each other’s difference. Furthermore, rather than constantly reaffirming your own ideas and solely looking for binding experiences, the participants are challenged through the frame of the performance. The interaction with the frame instills a bridging attitude as new rules and value systems are introduced with which the participants have to creatively engage.

To relate back to the opening quote of this paper: the recursion of attitudes in daily life, prototyped in participatory performance, is as far as I want to go in the perception that prototypes generate hope. The effects not being the creation of new ideas or instituting change, but providing the opportunity to have impact ‘merely’ by being, acting and holding bearing through a bridging attitude. Hope, thus, not comprehended as longing but rather as prototyping “a figure of sociological promise and abeyance” (Corsín Jiménez 2014:385).

6. References

7. Abbreviations

- **IMR**: Imagine Moving Rocks, participatory performance by Katrien Oosterlinck
  http://www.spatie.info/index.php/home/imagine-moving-rocks/

8. Biographical Note

Elvira Crois (1992) works at the University of Antwerp on her research project ‘The Connective Organism: towards a participatory approach to genetics in sensorial theatre’ in preparation of a PhD dissertation. As part of this project, the research aims to identify training methods to aid performers in the development of their capacity to interact with participants in embodied interactive and participatory theatre practices. She employs a participatory research methodology through which she closely interacts with the performance practices of Carte Blanche (DK) (http://www.cblanche.dk), Myriam Lefkowitz (FR) and Katrien Oosterlinck (BE) (http://spatie.info), the proposed case study in the paper. In preparation of this project she (co-)published two articles in the peer reviewed journal Documenta (Ghent University) considering the role of sensorial theatre as presence effect in contemporary western society (2015) and exploring the importance of theatre criticism (2015). Elvira Crois holds an MA degree in Theatre and Film Studies from the University of Antwerp and worked as a socio-cultural worker in Schaarbeek, Brussels, from 2015 until 2017. Furthermore, she is part of Apaya Network, a European network of young researchers who explore the poetics of sensorial theatre.

9. Notes

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